

Engine sells results, draws fire

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How objective are the results you get when you go to your favorite search engines? That's the question raised by a new [Open Text Index](#) search engine that recently began selling Web sites "preferred" status in its index so that their site is more likely to show up in results.

Search engines allow users to query vast indexes of Web sites to locate information, but they often generate dizzying amounts of data that can be overwhelming. Many engines use "relevancy rankings" that attempt to indicate how relevant the result is to the query. Web publishers, on the other hand, want search engines to help their sites rise above the sea of results, relevant or not.

Open Text is offering to help those publishers by allowing them premium slots in its search engine without requiring them to buy more expensive advertising banners. Under the company's [Preferred Listing](#) service, a merchant that sells personal computers online, for example, could ensure that its Web site appears as the top listing in searches for the terms *PC* and *computer*.

The approach has already created controversy since a marketing representative for Open Text posted information about the service on an email broadcast list. The information later ignited a debate in a separate email discussion group, called [Online-News](#). Open Text supporters say that search engines aren't obligated to maintain editorial objectivity in the same way that journalists are.

"Everybody expects [The New York Times](#) to adhere to journalistic integrity, but I don't think it should be anyone's expectation of a search engine on the Internet," said Rosalind Resnick, president of Net software and marketing company [NetCreations](#).

Open Text, which also sells off-the-shelf search engine technology to businesses, defends its practice because Preferred Listings clearly flags paid-for entries with special icons and mixes non-paid Web sites with the preferred ones. The company compares the service to the phone company's yellow pages in that both are comprehensive listings that give bigger ads and more prominent placement to advertisers who pay for the privilege.

"This service was in response to market demand. I have so many people calling me saying, 'Can we pay you to be in the top-ten results?' Eighty-five percent of our users will only look at the first ten results of a search," said Lilly Buchwitz, marketing manager for Open Text Index. "I've had some people say we're compromising our integrity, but it's exactly like the yellow pages."

But at least one other Net search engine says that comparison is not entirely accurate.

"Open Text Index represents itself to reveal Web sites in a relevant order. With the yellow pages,

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listings are delivered alphabetically. There's no illusion there," said Bob Davis, CEO of Lycos. "To me, this damages the integrity of the search service. This is like librarians putting books on the end [of a bookshelf] if you pay her some extra money. We would not do it with Lycos."

Other industry observers see the Open Text service as being akin to advertorials, the paid-for promotional stories that adorn magazines.

"A real danger comes when you start mixing advertising in with your editorial," said Margie Wylie, editor at industry newsletter Digital Media. "While it might be cheesy, it's not entirely deceptive. That division between editorial and advertising is more important on the Web than ever. If you lose your credibility, you lose your stock in trade because you're selling information."

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